

RAMBO FIRST BLOOD PART III: THE ROLE SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES CAN  
PLAY IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

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## **Abstract**

The People's Republic of China (PRC) increasingly seeks to assert its interests as it approaches its national centennial. This desire to be the predominant power in the Asia Pacific by casting the United States as a kind of transgressor encourages regional discontent in the process. Like the US, many other regional powers share cultural exchange and significant economic ties to the PRC which complicate challenging its increasingly aggressive and coercive foreign policy. Countries like Vietnam and the Philippines are hesitant to play host to a significant US military presence fearing a retaliation and perhaps believing that the status quo is or already has shifted. This paper will examine the ways in which US Special Operations Forces (SOF) can support Vietnam and the Philippines within their respective foreign policy frames in countering Chinese coercion by using Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 *Competition Continuum* to identify avenues for future cooperation. China's approach to international politics does not seek open conflict to not disrupt its program of national development; however, they will take aggressive actions to dissuade and intimidate when they feel their position is being challenged. Vietnam and the Philippines benefit from the assurance that SOF can offer in capacity building and represents a foundation off which to build more enduring security cooperation.

Research Study Advisor: Professor Mark Stout

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## **Introduction:**

As we approach the centennial of The People's Republic of China, the United States, and its regional partners are increasingly forced to reckon with a China that is determined to assert its political and economic primacy over the Asia Pacific, nested within these is how China uses its conventional military and irregular capabilities to achieve. China stresses its ascendance is rooted in a desire to ensure regional tranquility and engage peacefully with its neighbors in the Pacific.<sup>1</sup> That assertion is inconsistent with observable realities in the Pacific as China increasingly utilizes economic, technological, military, and paramilitary tools to convince, coerce, and intimidate other states into cooperating with its desire to establish regional primacy.<sup>2</sup> According to the Jamestown Foundation, China's political and military efforts are linked in promoting national development. Military strategy is directed by the country's need to maintain robust economic growth and operate from a position where China's internal stability and security is assured.<sup>3</sup> China's increasing tendency to project outwards is part of its evolving "active defense" doctrine which extends beyond its traditionally defined borders in order to safeguard its "territorial integrity."<sup>4</sup> This has led to several clashes and disputes with its neighbors as many small islands, coral reefs, and coastal shoals are claimed by several countries in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> The State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy (2015)*, Beijing: The State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, May, 2015, 3. <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/China%E2%80%99s-Military-Strategy-2015.pdf?x64579>.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Sayers, "Thoughts on the Unfolding U.S.-Chinese Competition: Washington's Policy Towards Beijing Enters its Next Phase," *War on the Rocks*, February 9, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/thoughts-on-the-unfolding-u-s-chinese-competition-washingtons-policy-towards-beijing-enters-its-next-phase/>.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy R. Heath, "Chapter 1: An Overview of China's Military Strategy," in Joe McReynolds (ed.), *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, (Washington D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, April 2016), 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Heath, *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, 21.

China possesses an increasingly formidable navy but has chosen to employ groups of coast guard cutters and maritime militia vessels to press its rights and seize territory upon which sophisticated artificial outposts are constructed that it can potentially militarize and defend as extensions of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Ships from the China Coast Guard (CCG) and its maritime militia increasingly harass and intimidate fishing fleets sometimes resulting in potentially lethal ramming incidents.<sup>5</sup> This confluence of aggressive behaviors is increasingly alarming to China's neighbors who are taking proactive measures such as escorting fishing fleets, buying new ships and weapons, and altering their strategic frames in official policy declarations. Increasingly Vietnam and the Philippines are warming to international allies and agreements to challenge China's hybrid approach.

This paper will look at the ways the United States can assist two of the region's principal victims of Chinese aggression: Vietnam and the Philippines. Both continue to exhibit some reluctance to be caught between superpowers but that does not preclude the possibility that the US can establish a good working relationship using Special Operations Forces (SOF) as a gateway to future cooperation and military coordination. They also don't represent states where the US might require more extensive defense commitments in the near future. Vietnam is reluctant to be seen as taking sides within the broader context of great power competition and has a foreign policy that prohibits formal defense alignment. In the case of the Philippines US SOF has a history of providing security force assistance (SFA) and conducted civil affairs post-1945 specifically during the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Increasingly however the current administration under President Rodrigo Duterte has sought to embrace relations with China so

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<sup>5</sup> Huong Le Thu, "Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam-China Relations," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 30, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/30/rough-waters-ahead-for-vietnam-china-relations-pub-82826>.



any increased US defense engagement is for the moment must be more limited in scope. Both states represent good midrange cases where SOF can demonstrate value perhaps leading to more established defense relations in the future. The question is, how can the US Special Operations Forces support allies in the Asia Pacific in countering China's 'Active Defense' approach? This paper will look at the ways SOF can function and support partners increasingly in an era of great power competition.

## **Background on the China Challenge**

To understand how to properly apply a framework for countering increased Chinese assertiveness in the Asia Pacific, we first need to better understand how the Chinese frame their strategic approach and how that relates to the broader cultural forces that shape Chinese strategic thinking. Following the end of the Cold War the US entered a period of economic prosperity and military hegemony, however, just as quickly fissures arose in the policy community around the potential ascendance of China as certainly a regional power if not signature geopolitical rival to the United States. In 1996 Denny Roy made some effort to conceptualize the different schools of thought on the subject characterizing this as the "China Threat" argument with different points of view arrayed in support or opposition to that framing.<sup>6</sup>

Roy's examination of these early discussions provide some context for how we view China today with the anti-China perspective arguing that China engaged in an increasing military buildup and modernization program developed with an eye toward eventually challenging the US.<sup>7</sup> Beyond the military considerations there were concerns following events like the

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<sup>6</sup> Denny Roy, "The 'China Threat' Issue: Major Arguments," *Asian Survey* 36, No. 8, (August 1996): p. 758. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2645437>.

<sup>7</sup> Roy, "China Threat," 760.

Tiananmen Square demonstration and China's increasing territorial disputes with its neighbors alongside its belligerent attitude toward unification with Taiwan.<sup>8</sup> A good summation of the argument against China comes from Roy quoting an editorial in *Far Eastern Economic Review* in which the columnist states, "Too often China's actions appear founded on the assumption that its neighbors are, if not enemies, at least obstacles..."<sup>9</sup>

The contrasting view laid out by Roy is one based on China's need for economic development and therefore an ability to work within the international system which is buoyed by its benign if somewhat inward-looking approach to international affairs.<sup>10</sup> Beyond that the anti-threat school asserted that its military development was not out of alignment with a broader need to modernize, and a more capable China could prove to be valuable security in the Asia Pacific and was not likely to pursue regional hegemony.<sup>11</sup>

### **China's Political-Military Approach:**

Unlike the United States where various administrations and defense institutions regularly publish national security strategies or studies in doctrinal development and areas of concern, China publishes its strategic framing much more irregularly and comprehensive translation and analysis takes time.<sup>12</sup> The latest articulation of China's broad strategic thinking is outlined in the defense whitepaper *China's Military Strategy (2015)* and *Science of Military Strategy* from 2001 and 2013, published by Academy of Military Science (AMS). As I lack the language skills and cultural knowledge to assess these publications independently, I am relying on the Jamestown

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 758-761.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 761.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 762-763.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 764-765.

<sup>12</sup> Joe McReynolds (ed.), *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, (Washington D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, April 2016), viii-ix.

Foundation's *China's Evolving Military Strategy* as a guide through China's strategic approach in these documents as well as my reading of *China's Military Strategy (2015)* which they have translated into English. Broadly speaking these Chinese government publications are best understood as extensions of China's desire to safeguard and optimize China's national development; military strategy is both subordinate to and inextricably linked to the leaderships broader political and economic aims.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this paper the relevant portions these texts focus on discussion around how China increasingly employs what it terms "Active Defense" as a means of overcoming conventional asymmetries between China and the US as a means of avoiding a potentially catastrophic conflict that negatively impacts its development goals. Active defense as the 2015 whitepaper notes is:

A holistic approach will be taken to balance war preparation and war prevention, rights protection and stability maintenance, deterrence and warfighting, and operations in wartime and employment of military forces in peacetime. They lay stress on farsighted planning and management to create a favorable posture, comprehensively manage crises and resolutely deter and win wars.<sup>14</sup>

This explanation helps demonstrate how China frames its current operational environment. They make no effort to draw significant distinctions between the employment of military forces in peacetime and wartime. China's approach to "rights protection" which includes "territorial sovereignty," and its expansive maritime claims are part of a proactive approach to seize the strategic high ground away from its internationally recognized borders.<sup>15</sup> China's recurring

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy R. Heath, "Chapter 1: An Overview of China's National Military Strategy," in McReynolds (ed.) *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> The State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy (2015)*, 10-11. <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/China%E2%80%99s-Military-Strategy-2015.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> The State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy (2015)*, 12.

actions in the South China Sea which include altercations with the Philippines and Vietnam illustrate this proactive national development strategy backed by militarized force in action.

One such example is the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff. The Philippines alongside China and Taiwan claim the fertile fishing territory but the Philippines prior to the 2012 altercation with China largely controlled the shoal and the surrounding territory.<sup>16</sup> As both sides sought to deescalate tensions discussions involving the US and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were making progress with seemingly both the Philippines and China backing down, as ASEAN refused to take a firm stand on the dispute both sides withdraw their vessels from the shoal. Shortly thereafter Chinese vessels returned and took full control over the area, erecting a barrier over the lagoon and maintaining a security presence that warns off Filipino fishing vessels to this day.<sup>17</sup> China's approach to rights protection is predicated on their specific conceptualization of deterrence, that China will act to maintain its national dignity if it feels its position is being challenged or compromised in a way that weakens their sovereignty.<sup>18</sup> As discussed however China's increasingly sees the limitations in overt uses of military force to achieve their national interests especially as the dangers of escalation imperil its broader development agenda.<sup>19</sup> With this in mind China is more likely to employ Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) unless it feels its sovereignty is significantly imperiled.<sup>20</sup> These

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas, "Counter-Coercion Series: Scarborough Shoal Standoff," *The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative and The Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 22, 2017. <https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-scarborough-standoff/>.

<sup>17</sup> Green et al., "Counter-Coercion Series: Scarborough Shoal Standoff."

<sup>18</sup> John Costello and Peter Mattis, "Chapter 6: Electronic Warfare and the Renaissance of Chinese Information Operations," in McReynolds (ed.) *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, 200.

<sup>19</sup> Morgan Clemens, "Chapter 11: PLA Thinking on Military Operations Other Than War," in McReynolds (ed.) *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, 363

<sup>20</sup> Clemens, "Chapter 11: PLA Thinking on Military Operations Other Than War," 364.

methods include influence operations, coercion and intimidation and form the basis of likely future actions against its neighbors.

## **Background**

### **Overview of the Current Challenge:**

Just as the United States shifted away from irregular concerns such as terrorism, extremism, and insurgency, an abiding contention seems to be that even potential peer adversaries, principally Russia and China, have observed how the US framed and conducted operations from the Gulf War onwards. Adapting themselves to shaping the information sphere prior to conducting any potential kinetic action.<sup>21</sup> Addressing conventional US strengths encompass everything from Advanced Persistent Threats (APTs) of the cyber world to more subtle influence campaigns making use of time-tested methods related to Cold War espionage. As the *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* makes clear:

The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by what the National Security Strategy classifies as revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Costello and Mattis, “Chapter 6: Electronic Warfare and the Renaissance of Chinese Information Operations,” 188.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, James Mattis, Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018, 2. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

The current abiding concern for the US defense policy community is not only how does the US array the joint force to combat this challenge, but how do we without sparking an armed clash between nuclear armed superpowers. It is undesirable to cede whole nations and regions to a revisionist power like China. All aspects of national power will need to play a role, but the importance of an irregular and adaptable approach modified from its Global War on Terror (GWOT) framing remains an area of intense interest and discussion. US Special Operations Forces have led the way in the GWOT, but there are disagreements about utility and the need for reorganization to better contend with state actors. Within peer competition the measure of success is less the impact direct action has on a terror cell than an entrenched effort frustrating broad political and economic aims. In recognition of the importance of irregular warfare in confronting potential adversaries the Department of Defense (DOD) issued a *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy* in which they state, “The Department’s approach to irregular warfare must evolve to address the full spectrum of competition and conflict against state adversaries, while sustaining campaigns against select non-state actors.”<sup>23</sup> While it is clear SOF will have an important role to play in Irregular Warfare (IW) competition involving state actors the questions and disagreements presented here will guide how we anticipate moving forward.

## **Exploring a History of Special Operations:**

Discussion and indeed popular books and films have often recounted the heroic exploits of specific missions and individuals within the US SOF community, but it is unusual to have

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<sup>23</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy*, James Mattis, Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2020, 2. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Oct/02/2002510472/-1/-1/0/Irregular-Warfare-Annex-to-the-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.PDF>.

comprehensive studies done about their proper application or developing framework for conceptualizing their use. In his book *Special Operations in World War II: British and American Irregular Warfare* Andrew L. Hargreaves tries to trace the co-evolution of American and British SOF during the war. Hargreaves summation is that without an effective pre-war formulation or guidebook to draw upon, British and American SOF evolved “in response to opportunity and exigency,” this does not mean neither country employed irregular units in the past but that the formation was largely ad hoc in response to an arising challenge.<sup>24</sup>

Hargreaves is careful throughout the book to draw distinctions in the development and missions between the types of units that undertake SOF, but his larger point is the character of IW requires fitting specially trained “elite” personnel to a broad range of missions unsuited to conventional massed forces.<sup>25</sup> The broader evolution of SOF in WWII lies outside the scope of this study, but there is a very valid point Hargreaves study points to, namely that in the face of unorthodox challenges, capabilities and missions must be reoriented to meet current threats. As SOF increasingly pivots to Great Power Competition (GPC) adopting new approaches to adversaries and allies will be necessary for success.

Similarly, William McRaven published his own study of special operations in which he narrowed the accepted Joint Chiefs of Staff definition to apply to his selected case studies to develop several overlapping theories.<sup>26</sup> Within his study McRaven sought to develop two explanatory concepts, the first being the need for SOF to establish “Relative Superiority” in the

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew L. Hargreaves, *Special Operations in World War II: British and American Irregular Warfare*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013, 270.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew L. Hargreaves, *Special Operations in World War II: British and American Irregular Warfare*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013, 4-6.

<sup>26</sup> William McRaven, *SPEC OPS Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Novato: Presidio Press, 1995, 2-3.

early stages of an operation to overwhelm an adversary and achieve their objectives before an adversary can counter.<sup>27</sup> The other was a formula for SOF to achieve relative superiority encompassing six principles, “simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose...”<sup>28</sup> To establish his framework McRaven lays out eight historical cases where the missions succeeded or failed based on their application of these principles, and if they were able to achieve relative superiority. Certainly, McRaven’s framework and case selection works well in determining outcomes, but all his cases hold to the more popular conception of what constitutes a special operation, namely kinetic action against a selected target for military purposes.

While both studies provide us with histories and frameworks for some of the types of operations conducted by SOF and good context for better understanding special operations as an evolving concept, but they do not address the political frames in which SOF might be required to operate before direct contact with an aggressor. In effect these are hot war studies that while informative do not help us better understand a broadening conceptualization for using SOF to offset Chinese aggression employed below a certain threshold of violence.

US Special Operations Forces do have an established history of operating in the Pacific specifically to support regional partners in non-combat functions both before and largely during the Vietnam era. Writing a brief history on the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group operations in the Asia Pacific Eugene Piasecki recounts how following his inauguration in 1961 President Kennedy emphasized the need for a more flexible response in countering communist aggression and irregular warfare in the developing world.<sup>29</sup> This period saw the development of regional

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<sup>27</sup> McRaven, SPEC OPS, 4-7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Eugene Piasecki, “Special Action Force Asia,” *Veritas* 13, No. 1 (2017): 2, Accessed 05/05/2021, [https://arsof-history.org/articles/pdf/v13n1\\_saf\\_asia.pdf](https://arsof-history.org/articles/pdf/v13n1_saf_asia.pdf).



Special Action Forces (SAFs) that were responsible for developing and overseeing Internal Defense Plans (IDPs) within their respective areas of responsibility.<sup>30</sup> In the Pacific region Special Action Force Asia (SAFASIA) was made up of the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group consisting of Special Forces (SF), Civil Affairs (CA), Military Intelligence (MI), a medical detachment and an engineering detachment all arrayed to support local partners increasingly as part of an adapted Foreign Internal Defense (FID) mission.<sup>31</sup>

Beginning in the early 1960's SAFASIA elements based in Hawaii and Okinawa were deployed to Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and increasingly South Vietnam to train both military and police forces.<sup>32</sup> Building these early cooperative relationships established the framework for employing SOF internationally. Prior to any US military deployment, the host country must first extend the invitation which had to be approved by both the US Ambassador and the Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), solidifying the idea that these operations were intended to be joint cooperative ventures between states not simply a US mission directing partner actions, as joint efforts produced dividends for the host country the approval process increasingly became a formality.<sup>33</sup> Beyond training local military and police forces in FID and Counterinsurgency (COIN) SAFASIA detachments increasingly focused on the CA mission, providing training on heavy equipment, improving sanitation and providing medical care and training to the local government and the civilian population.<sup>34</sup> By the late 1960's regional SAF commands had established Disaster Assistance and Relief Teams (DART)

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<sup>30</sup> Piasecki, "Special Action Force Asia," 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 3

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 3-4

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 4.

to provide assistance in the wake of natural disasters, including flooding in Pakistan in the Filipino of Island of Luzon in 1971 and 1972 respectively.<sup>35</sup>

Teams from the 1st Special Forces Group were literally lifesavers during both calamities. Operating rescue boats, inoculating civilians, distributing food, and directing rebuilding efforts, the DARTs saved lives and salvaged livelihoods, and earned America many friends.<sup>36</sup>

As the Vietnam war wound down the theater mission of SAFASIA began to see a reduction in operations and exercises but saw some short-term deployments to the Philippines in 1971 assisting the local government in a robust school building effort. Utilizing skills and courses SAFASIA's Operational Detachments had learned in basic construction, they lived and worked alongside villagers demonstrating the value of SOF's varied capabilities to cement relationships as part of a humanitarian mission.<sup>37</sup> By 1974 SAFASIA theater mission had largely been deemed unnecessary and the command was discontinued in favor of a small SOF presence in South Korea, but was eventually reconstituted in 1984 under the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group (Airborne) once again based in Okinawa.<sup>38</sup>

### **Thinking of SOF as a Deterrent:**

There is little disagreement within the study of SOF that contending with irregular, hybrid, or grey zone competition – presuming those terms encompass a good demarcation from understood conventional challenges posed by peer adversaries – will require a distinctly different

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 6-7.

approach than has been employed in the counterterrorism mission. There is increasing scholarship driven by interest in how best to conceptualize and prepare for “Gray Zone” conflict with state actors, most of whom will employ irregular tactics, techniques, and proxies to frustrate conventional deterrence frameworks.

In a report for Joint Special Operations University, Robert Haddick argues that an improved deterrence framework is necessary to counter state employment of irregular techniques and that SOF has a leading role to play.<sup>39</sup> In his analysis the capabilities already exist within SOF to adapt to this environment. What is required is a reconceptualization of deterrence that is prepared to deny and impose costs on states practicing unconventional warfare.<sup>40</sup> Haddick argues an improved and understood deterrence framework is needed by both the US policy community and allies, the question is how quickly it can be established as a response to events that are currently ongoing and have been for some time. Haddick’s rationale, that SOF’s varied capabilities will play a leading role as a response to hybrid challenges is sound.<sup>41</sup>

## **The Limited Utility of SOF in Great Power Competition:**

Hal Brands and Tim Nichols offer a nuanced critique of SOF’s utility in GPC. Brands and Nichols assert that current SOF deployments, missions, training, and preparation are slow in pivoting to peer competitors.<sup>42</sup> Even with that framing they do not discount the importance of

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<sup>39</sup> Joint Special Operations University, *How Do SOF Contribute to Comprehensive Deterrence?*, Robert Haddick, JSOU Report 17-11, MacDill Air Force Base, Florida: JSOU University Press, 2017, 65-66. [https://jsou.libguides.com/ld.php?content\\_id=51791971](https://jsou.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=51791971). (Accessed 02/13/2021).

<sup>40</sup> Joint Special Operations University, *How Do SOF Contribute to Comprehensive Deterrence?*, 67.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>42</sup> Hal Brands and Tim Nichols, “Special Operations Forces and Great-Power Competition in the 21st Century,” *American Enterprise Institute*, August 2020, 2. Accessed 02/15/2021. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Special-Operations-Forces-and-Great-Power-Competition-in-the-21st-Century.pdf?x91208>.

SOF in countering state adversaries and how they can be effectively employed going forward. Unlike Haddick they question the utility of SOF as a deterrent and suggest special operations can no longer serve as the force guiding the strategy like they have during the war on terror.<sup>43</sup> They do believe SOF will have important missions and provide a requisite flexibility in intelligence gathering, partner coordination, and in a worst-case scenario conducting strategic raids, among other potential missions.<sup>44</sup>

While many other researchers have chosen to emphasize the importance of SOF's flexibility and adaptability in countering asymmetric state aggression, Brands and Nichols believe an encompassing approach relying more on conventional diplomatic, economic, and intelligence tools to frame and counter revisionist actors ahead of SOF is needed.<sup>45</sup> A valid point made by Brands and Nichols is the recognition of a change in the military realities for the United States, that we can no longer expect to have maximal freedom to operate against adversaries in environments where the US enjoys broad conventional dominance. They argue the US will no longer be able to "shape" the battlefield, conduct kinetic operations and return to relative safety whether that is fortified bases or the end of a mission, and that peer competition means SOF's role will be diminished as the US wages broader influence campaigns below the threshold of armed conflict.<sup>46</sup>

## **The Potential for SOF in Great Power Competition:**

In contrast to those that see a more limited role of SOF in countering revisionist states like Russia and China some scholars argue SOF can still shape the environment and continue

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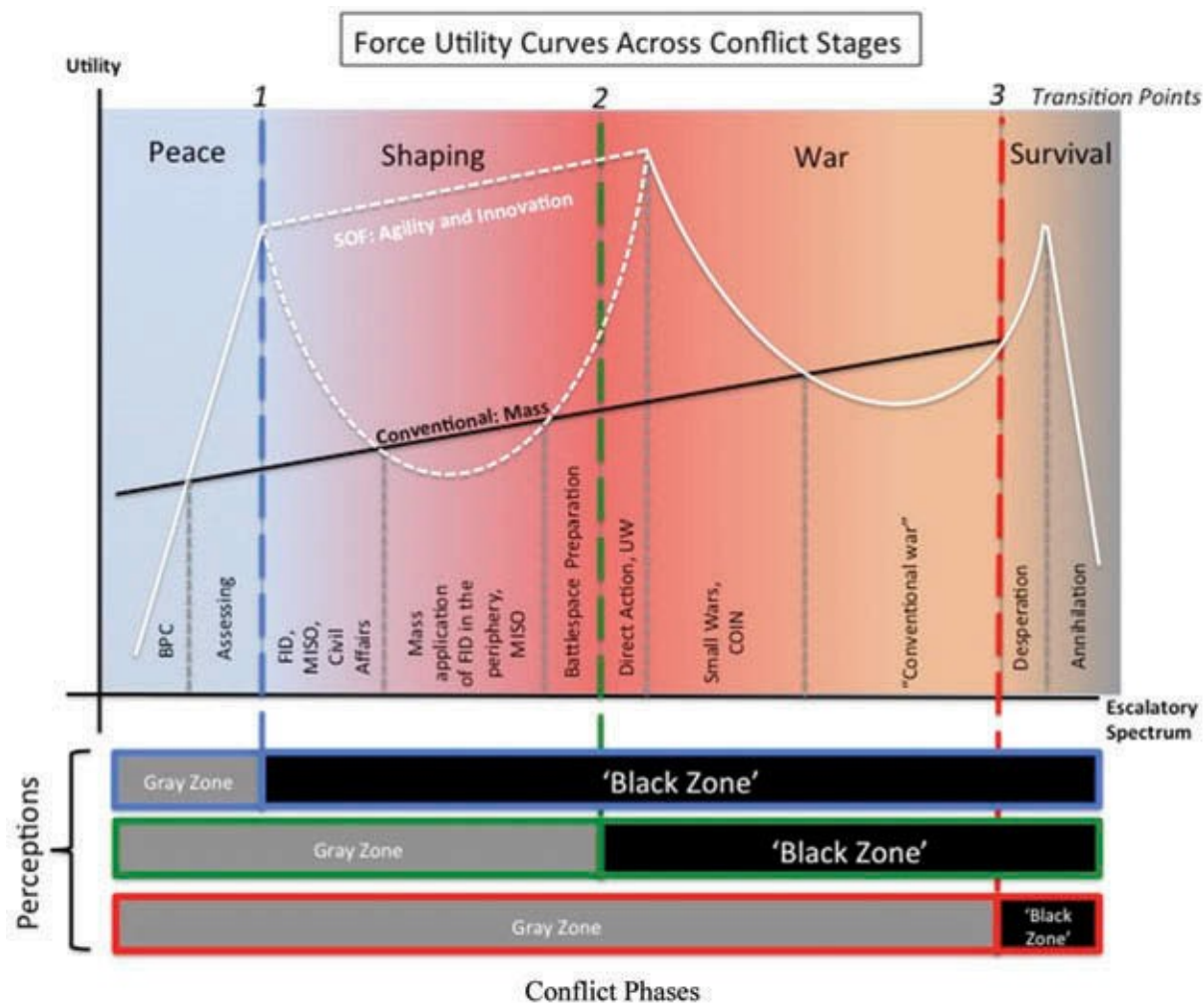
<sup>43</sup> Brands and Nichols, "Special Operations Forces and Great-Power Competition," 2.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 4.

through the spectrum conflict within the gray zone. Phillip Lohaus constructed a framework around existing models of conflict wherein the role SOF plays rises or falls across various phases which he terms, “peace, shaping, war and survival.”<sup>47</sup> The broader concept is represented by Lohaus below:



**Figure 1:** Force Utility Curves Across Conflict Stages.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Phillip Lohaus, “Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone: An Operational Framework for Using Special Operations Forces in the Space Between War and Peace,” *Special Operations Journal* 2, No. 2 (2016): 82, Accessed 02/08/2021, DOI: 10.1080/23296151.2016.1239989.

<sup>48</sup> Lohaus, “Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone,” 83.

His framework delineates both a continuum of conflict in the gray zone as well as the relative importance of SOF and their specific mission set throughout. Steep declines or periods of limited SOF utility denoted by the white line do not represent a complete absence or dramatic reduction in capability. Lohaus explains he is merely trying to illustrate the conditions under which more conventional approaches dominate which would naturally include open conflict as well as Building Partner Capacity (BPC) at the start of this spectrum.<sup>49</sup> The lower portion titled “Perceptions” is meant to gauge how different actors frame hostilities. Lohaus assesses that the European framework of pre-conflict shaping (blue) is short as committing forces to any theater suggests that hostilities are inevitable.<sup>50</sup> The green box is more closely aligned with US thinking where the commitment of resources and personnel is more gradual and there is a more distinct break between shaping and military action.<sup>51</sup> Finally the red box is more closely aligned with Russian and Chinese approaches employing a broader spectrum of forces early to seize the advantage ahead of a potential conventional conflict with the US who they fear maintains a decisive advantage.<sup>52</sup>

While Lohaus’s framework is valuable in sketching out a continuum of conflict within the gray zone, it still may be too linear in conceptualizing a continuum where the US can choose when to compete instead of one directed at a peer adversary who has achieved or surpassed conventional parity with the US. Kaley Scholl essentially makes this argument in an essay for Small Wars Journal focusing on China wherein she states, “...China is using all means at its nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. The US is losing this war

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 85

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 85

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

because gray operations fall outside traditional US defense strengths.”<sup>53</sup> Scholl has a good grasp of China’s political warfare strategy and focuses on them as the primary challenge for the US over other scholars explored here whose framing is more about conceptualizing the SOF pivot to fight state adversaries. Scholl’s article smartly builds from one of the few real-life examples we have of SOF countering a Chinese gray zone operation in Nigeria. A Special Forces ODA paired with Psychological Operations Detachment disrupted Chinese construction of a port by influencing Nigerian workers and organizing protests using a concerted information campaign.<sup>54</sup> Afterwards SOF and the Nigerian security forces discovered the Chinese planned to use the port for military purposes making it a potential target in future conflict. Passing this information on to the US IC they developed an analysis for embassy officials to brief Nigerian government who subsequently seized the land ending any possibility of China’s development of the port.<sup>55</sup> Scholl writes up a series of concisely drawn policy recommendations in which the US can better leverage funding and organization to use SOF in gray zone competitions. She argues that conventional conflicts are unlikely to occur precisely because the of the potential dangers associated with nuclear escalation.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately Scholl argues using more empowered state institutions supporting a SOF mission that emphasizes political warfare over kinetic action is an imperative for competing with China’s gray zone operations.<sup>57</sup>

### **SOF’s Role in Providing Indigenous Support:**

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<sup>53</sup> Kaley Scholl, “The Use of US Special Operation Forces in Great Power Competition: Imposing Costs on Chinese Gray Zone Operations,” Small Wars Journal, (December 7, 2020): Accessed 02/06/2021, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/use-us-special-operation-forces-great-power-competition-imposing-costs-chinese-gray-zone>.

<sup>54</sup> Scholl, “The Use of US Special Operation Forces in Great Power Competition.”

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, “The Use of US Special Operation Forces in Great Power Competition.”

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, “The Use of US Special Operation Forces in Great Power Competition.”

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, “The Use of US Special Operation Forces in Great Power Competition.”

In Steve Lewis's "Special Operations Forces' Role in Political Warfare." Lewis's applies the DIME framework (diplomatic, information, military, and economic) to examples where SOF can assist US country teams more broadly to extend a central government's ability to better meet their people's needs.<sup>58</sup> Lewis uses a series of historical examples and then establishes a broad lesson across each of the DIME frames for SOF to potentially apply in countering political warfare, and help establish US cooperative relationships with countries susceptible to adversary manipulation or internal disruption.<sup>59</sup> Lewis's framing is valuable in illustrating how SOF can be part of a broader effort but his examples largely relate to governments or movements overcoming internal disruptions, not direct and predatory techniques employed by an organized external actor like China. In the past SOF has demonstrated efficacy in remedying internal issues that might reduce susceptibility to foreign influence but resisting China's hybrid strategy which might not be strictly regarded as overtly threatening at times requires a more focused approach.

This idea links to a thesis from Sean R. Coffman, Ron J. Shumaker, and Jeff M. Givens at the Naval Post Graduate School. In their study they explain:

The Gray Zone environment and methods of irregular warfare are exceedingly complex in their own ways and would not be well suited to the eighteen-year-old riflemen straight out of high school, with little life experience. These multifaceted and demanding

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<sup>58</sup> Steve Lewis, "Special Operations Forces' Role in Political Warfare," *Special Operations Journal* 5, No. 2 (2019): pp. 179-180, Accessed 02/08/2021, DOI: 10.1080/23296151.2019.1674045.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis, "Special Operations Forces' Role in Political Warfare," pp. 185-186.



situations require an individual who is a warrior and diplomat, interchangeable as needed.

This layered identity is the true virtue of Special Operations Forces.<sup>60</sup>

The idea that the US cannot hope to rely on a strictly conventional response to a hybrid threat is valid. By the time the US injects significant resources into a campaign an adversary might have already seized a decisive advantage while also introducing an increasing amount of uncertainty and opportunities for mistakes and miscalculation. These types of errors could take the form of aircraft and ships shadowing each other too closely resulting in accidents or worse as younger personnel do not know how to appropriately respond to provocations. Coffman et al. rely on Bureaucratic Politics Model developed by Graham Allison and Mark Halperin measuring the interplay between senior and junior players and the way in which SOF can help inform policy makers of realities on the ground, potentially leading to more effective outcomes.<sup>61</sup> Coffman et al. employ this framework in two case studies that involved gray zone challenges in Somalia and the Philippines.<sup>62</sup> Examining each case they develop a model for emphasizing a need to understand and properly SOF in an irregular warfare context:

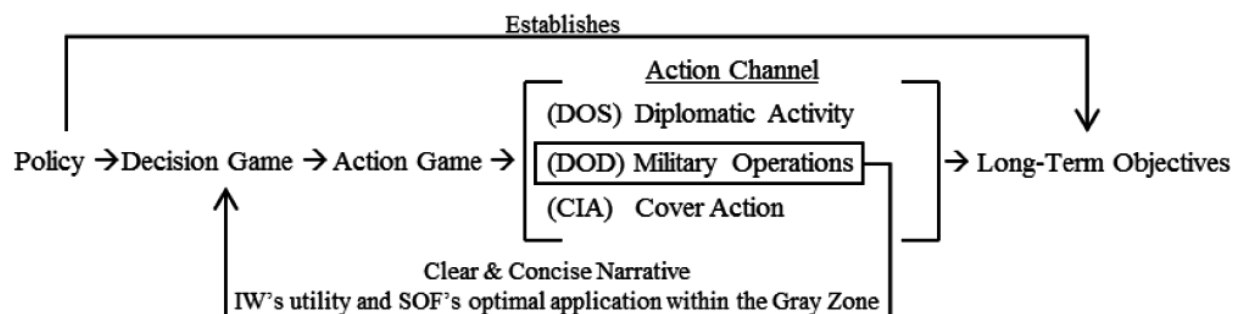
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<sup>60</sup> Sean R. Coffman, Ron J. Shumaker, and Jeff M. Givens, "Perception is Reality: Special Operations Forces in the Gray Zone," (thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, June 2016), p. 15.  
<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1026159.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> Coffman, Shumaker, and Givens, "Perception is Reality," 27-28.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

## Gray Zone Conflict



**Figure 2.** Gray Zone Conflict.<sup>63</sup>

Ultimately, they determine that in the case of the Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines (OEF-P) policy makers exhibited both an effective understanding of SOF capabilities as well as the proper framing around long-term objectives leading to clear guidance on operational parameters which contributed to the long term success of OEF-P.<sup>64</sup> Somalia was ultimately not successful in their estimation because “senior players” constrained SOF’s mission and failed to anticipate how a wider range of capabilities was required to lead to a successful outcome.<sup>65</sup>

Like Coffman et al. Linda Robinson also looked at SOF’s 14-year period of assisting the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) following the 9/11 attacks. The mission of SOF in OEF-P was to advise the AFP in countering the Al Qaeda linked Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiya (JI) that had expanded their operations in Philippines, targeting Americans and foreigners more openly.<sup>66</sup> As Robinson explains the US mission in the Philippines was non-combat and intended to engender within the AFP and related security institutions an enhanced

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 57

<sup>66</sup> Linda Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy,” *PRISM* 6, No. 3 (2016): 152. Accessed 03/12/2021. <https://cco.ndu.edu/PRISM-6-3/>.

capability to combat terrorism but also served a vital civil affairs and psychological operations function, linking Filipino institutions to the local populations needs as a means of luring them away from the extremists.<sup>67</sup> More broadly SOF was used to support other US and Filipino agencies in their missions facilitating partner cooperation and coordination with a much smaller US military footprint.<sup>68</sup> As the US mission began to draw to a close a reduction in violence and an increase in local confidence in the government of the Philippines reliably indicated the operation had been a success.<sup>69</sup> This backs up Coffman et al. in their assessment of OEF-P. What neither study really addresses however are the broader implications SOF-Filipino cooperation indicates for peer competition with China. Coffman and his co-authors analysis directly address gray zone operations but does so strictly with respect to internal disruption situated around extremism and insurgency. Robinson only makes one brief reference to China and the South China Sea (SCS), but she does make the point that the history of SOF cooperation in the Philippines bodes well for the potential for more meaningful future cooperation.<sup>70</sup>

### **Defense Department Pivots to Great Power Competition:**

While there is consistent agreement that SOF inevitably has a role in peer competition outside of open conflict, the previous studies discussed either focus too much on SOF's role in armed conflict (McChrystal, Hargreaves) or look to approach the subject of SOF in GPC in broader terms (Lohaus, Lewis, Brands and Nichols). The development of Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) which will be referred to by its title *Competition Continuum* hereafter is an attempt to conceptualize a security environment and deterrence framework that

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<sup>67</sup> Robinson, "The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy," 153.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 155-156.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 158.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 158.

accounts for the increasingly complicated interaction between states in a globalized world. The *Competition Continuum* makes the case that framing state competition must adapt to circumstances where the US will be challenged by states perhaps routinely in ways that do not meet the distinct divide between peace and armed conflict.<sup>71</sup> That break in categorization is not merely a line of understanding for the American people but one that denotes where and how the DOD must begin to commit resources and inevitably incur losses.<sup>72</sup>

The *Competition Continuum* framework is an attempt to orient the DOD toward a shift in thinking. Breaking competition into three categories, “cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict.”<sup>73</sup> During each of these phases the JCS advocates for cooperation not just between US agencies and forces but as a matter of necessity with international partners in achieving US objectives as well as their own.<sup>74</sup> To that end this study will assess the validity of using the Joint Doctrine Note’s portion on “Campaigning Through Cooperation” in conjunction alongside the SOF mission set described in *A Vision for 2021 and Beyond* the 1st Special Forces Command – Airborne’s framework for participating in an era of Great Power Competition (GPC).<sup>75</sup>

The 1st SFC – Airborne’s paper on reorienting SOF capabilities for a new era discusses the linked roles its component branches play as part of an overall SOF mission set. Special Forces (SF) perform a variety of functions under the umbrella of US Special Operations

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<sup>71</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Competition Continuum*, Daniel J. O’Donahue, Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, June 3, 2019. 1. [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn\\_jg/jdn1\\_19.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_19.pdf). (Accessed 02/08/2021).

<sup>72</sup> JCS, *Competition Continuum*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>75</sup> 1st Special Forces Command – Airborne, *A Vision for 2021 and Beyond*, John W. Brennan, David R. Holton and Ted C. Munter, Fort Bragg: United States Army Special Operations Command, 3, 2021. <https://www.soc.mil/USASFC/HQ.html>.

Command (USSOCOM) which include but are not limited to security force assistance (SFA), unconventional warfare (UW), foreign internal defense, direct action, counterterrorism, foreign humanitarian assistance and counterinsurgency.<sup>76</sup> The role of SF is generally to maintain and provide security both for and with local partners as well as SOF's other components.<sup>77</sup> Civil Affairs forms the backbone of SOF's role within the competition continuum, they provide the bulk of cultural knowledge and language expertise and are the core element in civil network development and engagement (CNDE).<sup>78</sup> The role SOF CA teams play is to provide other elements with a comprehensive understanding of the local situation and the potential impact of operations during cooperation and post-conflict phases.<sup>79</sup> The Psychological Operations branch (PO) of SOF are the principle practitioners of Military Information Support Operations (MISO), PO elements assess vulnerabilities and potential points of influence within the local environment.<sup>80</sup> PO support the CA and SF branches by helping to cultivate favorable narratives and in identifying and counteracting vulnerabilities that an adversary might seek to exploit within along the competition continuum.<sup>81</sup> By looking at the ways practitioners anticipate to contend with aggression below armed conflict this paper will apply SOF's framing of its mission to working with potential allies in challenging Chinese aggression and coercion in the Asia Pacific. Like Scholl *A Vision for 2021 and Beyond* also makes use of Nigeria as an exemplar of cooperation below the threshold of armed conflict suggesting that forward presence and commitment to engaging with partners openly successfully thwarted a Chinese attempt to

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<sup>76</sup> 1st Special Forces Command – Airborne, *A Vision for 2021 and Beyond*, 12.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 11.

establish a strategic foothold in Nigeria.<sup>82</sup> By applying these same principles to Vietnam and the Philippines the US might have some similar success in the future.

In the current environment the US must interact and deal with China across the political and economic spectrum even as it is arraying and organizing its armed forces to deter US military coordination with regional partners. At yet another level, states globally, specifically those that abut China's principal interests in the South China Sea, must carefully consider how their cooperation with the US on security coordination will impact their broader dealings with China. In effect they practice their own competition continuum which recognizes the importance of China to their economic development. David Shambaugh notes this in an interview for CSIS saying that while the US maintains an edge in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and has good relationships when it comes to security cooperation with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), when it comes to trade China dramatically outpaces the US, \$500 billion to \$350 billion.<sup>83</sup> Shambaugh observes that ASEAN countries have trouble conceptualizing how best to respond to Chinese military provocations in East Asia given their relative military disadvantage and their close economic ties to the PRC.<sup>84</sup> This presents an opportunity for the US to better frame security assistance as cooperation between partners in stark contrast to China's approach which is increasingly declaratory and assertive.<sup>85</sup>

## **Methodology**

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 16-17

<sup>83</sup> David Shambaugh, interview by Mike Green, *The Great Power Gambit: U.S. and China in Southeast Asia*, CSIS, January 5, 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Shambaugh, *The Great Power Gambit*.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., *The Great Power Gambit*.

While enacting the full *Competition Continuum* framework necessarily includes discussion of the potential for armed conflict, the aim of SOF enacting partner coordination particularly against an adversary like China is to build and sustain a regional partnership below the threshold of violence. To that end this study will assess the validity of using the Joint Doctrine Note's portion on "Campaigning Through Cooperation." By examining the way areas SOF can build partner capacity either by providing expertise in SFA, FID and UW among other functions practiced by Special Forces teams or acting alongside their CA and PO brethren to better understand and prepare their operating environments in the face of potential state and extremist aggression is a mission that US Special Operations Forces train for routinely under their Special Operations Command (SOCOM) umbrella.<sup>86</sup> By undertaking a qualitative assessment of Vietnam and the Philippines interactions with China this study will assess the ways SOF can be effective in capacity building as China is shifting to an 'active defense' approach that relies on intimidation and limited aggression over dedicated armed conflict.

To make an assessment this paper will rely on how SOF can potentially aid Vietnam and the Philippines working within their proscribed prescribed policy positions. In the case of Vietnam's long established "Three Nos" policy which prohibit formal alliances, foreign bases, and strategic alignment, and the recently added corollary emphasizing opposition to aggression.<sup>87</sup> Assessing the Philippines requires looking at their *National Security Policy* document for 2017 through 2022, and their goals and strategic objectives that pertain to foreign engagement and

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<sup>86</sup> USSOCOM, "Core Activities," *United States Special Operations Command*, 2019, <https://www.socom.mil/about/core-activities>.

<sup>87</sup> Huong Le Thu, "Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam-China Relations," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 30, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/30/rough-waters-ahead-for-vietnam-china-relations-pub-82826>.

security cooperation.<sup>88</sup> Looking at these policy stances I will determine if SOF can build a framework for ongoing cooperation with Vietnam and the Philippines using the JCS Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 *Competition Continuum*. Campaigning through cooperation includes the following criteria in Box 1 for ways the US can potentially build on engaging with partners on their terms which maximize security coordination over an extended period:

**Cooperation**

**Engage Selectively.** Cooperate transactionally with a partner (who is often a competitor elsewhere) to achieve a specific objective.

**Maintain.** Sustain an open-ended cooperative relationship with an ally or partner and secure bilateral advantage but without significant increase in resources or commitment.

**Advance.** Establish and improve an open-ended cooperative relationship with an ally or partner by significantly increasing resources or commitment.

**Box 1.** *Competition Continuum*.<sup>89</sup>

### Case Selection Method:

The Philippines and Vietnam represent midrange examples of long-term strategic partnerships for the US in offsetting or rolling back PRC attempts to establish strategic dominance over the region. Both countries have a complicated relationship to the US and China from a security standpoint but their ongoing interactions with Beijing over disputes in the South China Sea mark them as critical allies for the US. While the US must expect that they will continue to engage in robust trade and development programs with the PRC, there are

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<sup>88</sup> Republic of the Philippines. *National Security Policy for Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People*. Manila: Republic of the Philippines, April 2017. 21-23 <https://itms.pnp.gov.ph/main/storage/2020/06/NSP-2017-2022.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> JCS, *Competition Continuum*, 6.



exploitable opportunities in building security capacity that can help frustrate China's ongoing efforts to expand its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) inside its Nine-dash line.<sup>90</sup> Within that line China has ongoing territorial disputes with the both the Philippines and Vietnam over a number of island chains including the Paracel Islands, The Spratly Islands, and the Scarborough Shoal, all claimed wholly or in part by a number of regional powers including Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, China, and the Philippines.<sup>91</sup> Beyond these examples China claims the Senkaku Islands which are administered by Japan but are also claimed by Taiwan.<sup>92</sup>

Taiwan and Japan fall outside the scope of this study as both represent significant red lines for US conflict vis a vis China. Japan hosts a significant US military presence and US-Japanese Security cooperation is an established routine backed up Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan. As for Taiwan, increasingly the US has engaged in Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) through the Taiwan Straits as a signal to China that the US is prepared to enforce Taiwan's sovereignty.<sup>93</sup> In either case support for both countries is an established part of US military signaling to China often involving significant resources and a firm commitment that aggressive acts could be met with significant retaliation.

Even with the memory of the US-Vietnam War hanging over both countries, Vietnam's more recent and intensifying disputes with China have created an opening for improved relations. Vietnam has softened somewhat on its "Three Nos" policy which was intended to

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<sup>90</sup> Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, Ronald O'Rourke, Report No. R42784, Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Updated February 18, 2021: 5. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42784.pdf>. (Accessed 02/05/2021).

<sup>91</sup> Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>93</sup> David B. Larter, "In Challenging China's Claims in the South China Sea, the US Navy is Getting More Assertive," *DefenseNews*, February 5, 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/02/05/in-challenging-chinas-claims-in-the-south-china-sea-the-us-navy-is-getting-more-assertive/>.

communicate non-hostility to Beijing, circumstances are shifting with the increasing assertiveness practiced by Beijing in the South China Sea (SCS).<sup>94</sup> Vietnam represented a good case to examine for the US military and SOF in particular to begin to establish a framework for security cooperation long term as Vietnam has specifically sought to avoid permanent basing of foreign forces as well as reluctance to align itself geopolitically with one state against another.<sup>95</sup> Vietnam also contrasts with the Philippines where a framework for mutual defense exists but has been waning as relations between Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte and Beijing had been warming until recently.

While the US and the Philippines have enjoyed good security cooperation since the 1999 adoption of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), recent actions by Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte including his decision to suspend the VFA in February of 2020 have cast doubt on the future of security cooperation between both countries. In the interim between that decision and this writing however Duterte has made the decision to suspend sunsetting the VFA twice as tensions have increased between the Philippines and China with the next deadline set for August 2021.<sup>96</sup> With this in mind the US should find ways of demonstrating the value of US security cooperation in advising and assisting the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) by demonstrating how on even a small scale SOF can lend expertise in opposing China's Informationized approach below the threshold of open conflict. Both cases represent a spectrum

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<sup>94</sup> Huong Le Thu, "Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam-China Relations," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 30, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/30/rough-waters-ahead-for-vietnam-china-relations-pub-82826>.

<sup>95</sup> Thu, "Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam-China Relations."

<sup>96</sup> Derek Grossman, "The Philippines is Sticking Right by America's Side," *The Diplomat*, December 2, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/the-philippines-is-sticking-right-by-americas-side/>.

of analysis in which Vietnam is an opportunity for the US to build security through good faith interactions, while the Philippines may well represent a relationship that needs to be salvaged.

There are obviously other structural barriers to more intensive security cooperation involving SOF in both countries. Besides President Duterte's frustration with the US and his wavering support for the VFA, US involvement is contingent on an invitation from the host country and some formulation around the status of forces and their role in education and training of local forces.<sup>97</sup> The Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of State (DOS) have a congressionally authorized budget for International Military Education and Training (IMET), once agreements have been made IMET can be used to govern the conduct of partner forces if their actions run contrary to established US values.<sup>98</sup> In the case of Vietnam where the post-war relationship is improving but has not yet moved beyond symbolic actions and statements over a desire to maintain regional stability the US has made overtures to increase security exchange. The US has transferred US Coastguard cutters to the Vietnamese and US vessels have made port calls in recent years in addition to the US lifting prohibitions on the sale of lethal arms to Vietnam.<sup>99</sup> The Vietnamese however are reticent both to expend an increased portion of their defense budget on expensive US weapon systems as well as concern about long term US commitment to region in the face of increasing tensions with China, in the near term close bilateral security cooperation with Vietnam may be questionable but the US can potentially remedy that reality by offering more tangible and proactive assurances.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> "US International Security Assistance Education and Training," Federation of American Scientists, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://fas.org/asmp/campaigns/training.html#background>.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, "US International Security Assistance Education and Training."

<sup>99</sup> Tu Lai, "Looking Beyond Symbolism in US-Vietnam Defence Cooperation," *East Asia Forum*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/04/18/looking-beyond-symbolism-in-us-vietnam-defence-cooperation/>.

<sup>100</sup> Lai, "Looking Beyond Symbolism in US-Vietnam Defence Cooperation."

One further area of concern involving future US military cooperation with both countries are ongoing concerns about their civil rights records and how their security forces have committed human rights violations and been used to suppress internal dissent. Both Vietnam and the Philippines have been criticized by the international community, the DOS, and human rights organizations repeatedly. In their 2019 assessment Duterte's Philippines has illegally detained political opponents and judges critical of his "drug war" which has resulted in many extra-judicial killings.<sup>101</sup> According to Human Rights Watch there are as many as 23,000 homicides currently under investigation relating to Duterte's drug war with many believed to have been summarily carried out by police or gangs working in collusion with the administration anti-drug policies.<sup>102</sup> The ripple effects of Duterte's domestic policies has caused him to lash out at political opponents and the press, increasing the degree to which his administration has been criticized internationally and straining relations with the US.<sup>103</sup> While this study will mainly examine the Philippines strategic objectives with respect to international affairs, one of the policies stated objectives is to codify Duterte's policies around drug enforcement and domestic order.<sup>104</sup>

Similarly, Vietnam has its own problems with human rights violations in a way that would complicate security cooperation with the US. Security forces and state structures limit free expression and political organization that runs contrary to government policy.<sup>105</sup> The

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<sup>101</sup> "Philippines Events of 2018," *Human Rights Watch*, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/philippines#981f12>.

<sup>102</sup> "Philippines Events of 2018."

<sup>103</sup> "Philippines Events of 2018."

<sup>104</sup> Republic of the Philippines, *National Security Policy for Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People*, 19

<sup>105</sup> "Vietnam Events of 2019," *Human Rights Watch*, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/vietnam#:~:text=Vietnam%20did%20little%20to%20improve,freely%20practice%20beliefs%20and%20religion>.

government also restricts freedom of the press and the public's access to information which includes social media like Facebook and search engines like Google which are heavily censored, no independent media outlets can operate freely within Vietnam.<sup>106</sup>

It is reasonable to say that prior to more comprehensive security cooperation US leadership would have to have at least some of these concerns addressed with at least meaningful attention paid to correcting the most severe violations, the Filipino practice of extra-judicial killings likely being one example and that may not be meaningfully rectified until President Duterte leaves office in 2022. The Leahy Law prohibits funding or training to support states or regimes that have been determined to be perpetrating gross violations of human rights (GVHR).<sup>107</sup> It is important to note exceptions to the Leahy Law are possible, US security forces can participate with local governments in the event of natural disaster or other national emergencies, it is also possible for partner security forces to be vetted through a “remediation” process wherein they have made significant efforts to overcome past violations.<sup>108</sup> Finally part of security force assistance and training might include efforts to improve a partner's human rights record where exceptions have been discussed and deemed appropriate by the Secretaries of State and Defense.<sup>109</sup> It remains unclear the extent to which Vietnam and Philippines can make adjustments in a way that allows for a successful vetting and opens the door for future cooperation however the following sections focus on the ways SOF can support both states when in competition with China.

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<sup>106</sup> “Vietnam Events of 2019.”

<sup>107</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *About the Leahy Law*, Washington D.C.: January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/human-rights/leahy-law-fact-sheet/>.

<sup>108</sup> Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *About the Leahy Law*.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, *About the Leahy Law*.

## **Case Studies**

### **Vietnam**

#### **Recent Context:**

Despite an ideological kinship, the China-Vietnam relationship has endured both intense diplomatic and economic disputes as well as the occasional military and paramilitary encounter. In the late 1970's and 1980's Vietnam and China fought over land in the South China Sea with China attacking a Vietnamese force in 1988 seizing the Johnson South Reef.<sup>110</sup> For years China has increasingly sought to secure maritime control over several strategic small island chains, coastal reefs, and low-lying shoals claimed by Vietnam and other countries in the South China Sea. While relations between the two countries have ebbed and flowed over the years, increasingly Vietnam recognizes China's actions are part of a pattern of coercion and intimidation that are designed to bring the smaller countries in the region to heel, something that China's own statements declare outright. Former US National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster recounts how in a meeting at ASEAN in 2010 China's foreign minister flatly told the assembled delegates "China is a big country, and you are all small countries."<sup>111</sup> McMaster asserts that China's ongoing efforts toward national renewal are part of a broader range of efforts to "establish a new tributary system," in the region where countries like Vietnam and the Philippines are required to bend to its will.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Huong Le Thu, "Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam-China Relations," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 30, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/30/rough-waters-ahead-for-vietnam-china-relations-pub-82826>.

<sup>111</sup> H.R. McMaster, "How China Sees the World," *The Atlantic*, May, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/05/mcmaster-china-strategy/609088/>.

<sup>112</sup> H.R. McMaster, "How China Sees the World."

In recent years China has used the China Coast Guard (CCG) and its lightly armed maritime militia force to safeguard and press the rights of Chinese fishermen and mining cooperatives to develop territory inside Vietnam's claimed EEZ. In 2014 China used these proxies to defend China's placement of an oil rig inside Vietnamese territorial waters resulting in an armed standoff.<sup>113</sup> China's 2015 defense white paper codifies these kinds of actions as doctrine stating, "Integrated combat forces will be employed to prevail in system-vs-system operations featuring information dominance, precision strikes and joint operations."<sup>114</sup> Eventually China withdrew the oil rig, but it instilled in Vietnam a need to more proactively prepare for future provocations by seeking international remediation as well as enhancing their own military capabilities.<sup>115</sup> In its own 2019 defense white paper Hanoi updated its "Three Nos" policy adding a fourth where it condemns threats and use of force intending to coerce Vietnam's compliance with the implication being this more strident position followed from increasing Chinese provocations.<sup>116</sup> This change came before a potentially lethal 2020 incident in which a Chinese coast guard cutter rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat, abandoning the crew to be rescued by Vietnamese coast guard.<sup>117</sup> Vietnam is increasingly signaling its willingness to cooperate with international partners in stabilizing the situation in the South China Sea, and ongoing clashes with China represent an opportunity for the US to build on its steadily improving relationship with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

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<sup>113</sup> Huong Le Thu, "Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam-China Relations."

<sup>114</sup> The State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy (2015)*, 11. <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/China%E2%80%99s-Military-Strategy-2015.pdf?x64579>.

<sup>115</sup> Lyle J. Morris, Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Keep, *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War*, Washington D.C.: RAND Corporation, 2019, 109-110. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2942.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2942.html).

<sup>116</sup> Huong Le Thu, "Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam-China Relations."

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., "Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam-China Relations."

## Discussion

### The Three Laws of Robotics:

Isaac Asimov conceived of the “Three Laws of Robotics” as a kind of perfect logical loop wherein humans should be shielded from potential harm from their artificial creation. In brief, a robots programming prevents it from harming humans or allowing humans to be harmed, they must obey orders except when in conflict with the above, and they are allowed a sense of self-preservation unless it conflicts with the two previous directives. Even as the laws seem self-reinforcing and incontrovertible much of Asimov’s writings and plenty of discussion in the decades since they were conceived consider the ways in which they might be circumvented, reconsidered, or cast aside in favor of a new understanding.<sup>118</sup> Similarly the longstanding “Three Nos” are intended to insulate Vietnam from international conflicts and signal to Beijing in particular a nonthreatening posture.<sup>119</sup> The Three Nos can be summarized as “no military alliances, no aligning with one country against another and no foreign military bases on Vietnamese Soil.”<sup>120</sup>

### Building to Cooperation:

Just as Asimov’s three laws are a subject of debate within both the scientific and philosophical communities Vietnam’s Four Nos leave potential wiggle room for diplomatic and military engagement. Using the “Campaigning Through Cooperation” framing from the JCS

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<sup>118</sup> Christopher Salge, “Asimov’s Laws Won’t Stop Robots from Harming Humans, So We’ve Developed a Better Solution,” *Scientific American*, July 17, 2017. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/asimovs-laws-wont-stop-robots-from-harming-humans-so-weve-developed-a-better-solution/>.

<sup>119</sup> Huong Le Thu, “Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam-China Relations.”

<sup>120</sup> Derek Grossman and Dung Hyunh, “Vietnam’s Defense Policy of ‘No’ Quietly Saves Room for ‘Yes,’” *The Diplomat*, January 19, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/vietnams-defense-policy-of-no-quietly-saves-room-for-yes/>.



*Competition Continuum* I examined the ways SOF can be used to aid Vietnam without compromising the integrity of their stated defense prohibitions.<sup>121</sup>

Cooperation Criteria	Vietnam's Three Nos Plus One Condition			
	No #1 No Alliances	No #2 Non-Alignment	No #3 No Foreign Bases	No #4 Commitment to Non-Aggression
Engage Selectively	SFA, CA, MISO	SFA, CA	Partner Coordination	CA, MISO
Maintain	SFA, CA, MISO	SFA, CA, MISO	Partner Coordination	CA, MISO
Advance				

**Table 1.** Cooperating within the four nos.

Applying this conceptualization to each of the Four Nos we can tease out how SOF can aid Vietnam in capacity building and therefore make it more effective in balancing against China and potentially establish a more substantial framework of cooperation with the US in the future.

### Using SOF to Get Around 'No':

Vietnam is reticent to codify security arrangements with other states due to its history of conflict with larger powers and not wanting to commit to aiding an ally in a conflict in which Vietnam has no interest. As Derek Grossman and Dung Huynh note however this predilection for no alliances and non-alignment just pertains to a formalized arrangement which does not

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<sup>121</sup> JCS, *Competition Continuum*, 6-8.

preclude the possibility of other forms of military exchange and security cooperation.<sup>122</sup>

Looking at table 1, SOF can “engage selectively” with Vietnam across the spectrum of its legally proscribed roles. Special Operations Forces are ideal for engaging in these kinds of transactional arrangements and can coordinate efforts across a variety of functions. Vietnam is undertaking more comprehensive defense modernization and spending in reaction to Chinese aggression, signaling to China and potential international allies an increased willingness to push back.<sup>123</sup> In 2016 the Obama Administration abolished restrictions on the sale of lethal arms to Vietnam just as the country was looking to acquire more effective foreign arms as well as buttress its own defense industry.<sup>124</sup> Taken together these actions signal a still informal but more welcoming attitude toward foreign military assistance.

US Special Operations can step into a kind of advisory role familiar to their operating ethos in other countries around the world. The US could make SOF advisors available to train the Vietnamese on some of these new weapon systems it has purchased in conjunction with its recent defense budget increases, Vietnam is spending more on new weapons and equipment than any other ASEAN country with a budget of around 5.8 billion dollars as of 2018.<sup>125</sup> While many of these systems are foreign and directed mainly and better outfitting their conventional forces, linking the operation of new submarines and surface craft to an enhanced joint force framework they are pursuing would benefit from SOF expertise in coordinating distributed operations,

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<sup>122</sup> Derek Grossman and Dung Hyunh, “Vietnam’s Defense Policy of ‘No’ Quietly Saves Room for ‘Yes.’”

<sup>123</sup> Van-Hoa Vu, Jenn-Jaw Soong and Khac-Nghia Nguyen, “Vietnam’s Perceptions and Strategies Toward China’s Belt and Road Initiative Expansion: Hedging with Resisting,” *The Chinese Economy* 54, No. 1 (2021): 60-61. Accessed 03/08/2021. DOI: 10.1080/10971475.2020.1809818.

<sup>124</sup> Van-Hoa Vu, Jenn-Jaw Soong and Khac-Nghia Nguyen, “Vietnam’s Perceptions and Strategies Toward China’s Belt and Road Initiative Expansion,” 61.

<sup>125</sup> Bich T. Tran, “Understanding Vietnam’s Military Modernization Efforts,” *The Diplomat*, November 25, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/understanding-vietnams-military-modernization-efforts/>.

establishing secure lines of communication and linking air and sea assets over long distances.<sup>126</sup> Additionally, Vietnam has purchased new small arms licenses from Israel and is developing the ability to produce NATO caliber ammunition which US Special Operations have extensive experience in fielding and training local partners.<sup>127</sup>

Beyond an overt SFA mission the most effective route for SOF to take especially considering the potential political and bureaucratic constraints associated with Vietnam's human rights record is a civil affairs mission. Establishing a more substantial bilateral defense relationship begins with building rapport and demonstrating the value SOF can bring to Vietnam. Similar to operations the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group undertook in Asia during the Vietnam War era CA teams could institute inoculation drives, construction projects and improving water treatment systems alongside military engineers.<sup>128</sup> Another potential avenue to exploit is veterinary care and animal husbandry efforts just as they had done when deployed to Ryukyu Islands in the 1970's.<sup>129</sup> Vietnam also has concerns around mine sweeping and removal on land and at sea. Vietnam has a mixed array of naval minesweepers from Italy and Russia, that may not necessarily be a barrier to entry even if SOF trainers are less familiar with foreign equipment, Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC) has adapted itself to improving demining efforts across Asia and one of the principal areas of focus is improving mine detection and awareness.<sup>130</sup> It is also worth noting that some of mines and unexploded ordinance still

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<sup>126</sup> Zachary Abuza and Nguyen Nhat-Anh, "Vietnam's Military Modernization," *The Diplomat*, October 28, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/10/vietnams-military-modernization/>.

<sup>127</sup> Abuza and Nhat-Anh, "Vietnam's Military Modernization."

<sup>128</sup> Piasecki, "Special Action Force Asia," 5.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>130</sup> Joe Lokey, "The U.S. Pacific Command Humanitarian Demining Program," *The Journal of Mine Action* 5, No. 1 (April 2001): 2, <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2132&context=cisr-journal>.  
Kirsi Peltonen et al. "Parental Violence and Adolescent Mental Health," *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 19, no. 11 (2010): 813-822, doi: 10.1007/s00787-010-0130-8.

operational or unaccounted for were either copies of US ordinance or perhaps munitions left behind by the US during the war so the US can bring both historical expertise and a commitment to right past mistakes.<sup>131</sup> In particular Joe Lokey notes that Vietnam at the time of his writing were in need of improving mine detection in their shallow coastal waters an area where US Naval Special Warfare teams can support and train Vietnamese crews and drivers in detecting and clearing without necessarily engaging in the activities themselves, which as Lokey notes was prohibited and will likely remain prohibited as part of any new training agreement.<sup>132</sup>

SOF assistance in supporting and strengthening Vietnam's domestic and civil affairs can also buttress it against both internal divisions as well as the potential for future Chinese influence operations. China is increasingly blending information operations with cyberspace, as they seek to blur the distinctions between operations undertaken during wartime and those that are part of an informatized approach to achieving their foreign policy objectives.<sup>133</sup> An area where SOF CA excel is in engagement with local forces and populations as part of a CNDE approach.<sup>134</sup> Within a cooperation framework CA and PO teams can recognize where tensions might be exploited and buttress notational institutions to better their serve populations as well as support efforts to counter adversary information operations. Making use of these largely non-aggressive approaches to capacity building SOF can engage with Vietnam on its terms within the JCS *Competition Continuum* framing,<sup>135</sup> engaging selectively with the Vietnamese while solidifying a cooperative relationship that does not compromise their commitment to non-aggression and non-alignment. Perhaps most importantly SOF can operate in Vietnam with more limited resources

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<sup>131</sup> Lokey, "The U.S. Pacific Command Humanitarian Demining Program," 6.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>133</sup> John Costello and Peter Mattis, "Chapter 6: Electronic Warfare and the Renaissance of Chinese Information Operations," in McReynolds (ed.) *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, 175-176.

<sup>134</sup> 1st Special Forces Command – Airborne, *A Vision for 2021 and Beyond*, 10.

<sup>135</sup> JCS, *Competition Continuum*, 6.

and facilities in contrast to more conventional US military operations. The Vietnamese ‘no’ regarding no foreign bases is firm but that has not stopped them from leasing facilities to foreign powers including the Russian military at Cam Ranh Bay from 1978 to 2002.<sup>136</sup> Similarly SOF does not require any sort of formal arrangement for basing and facilities or sustaining their purpose in country, particularly one where there is no expectation of direct hostilities. US special operations can make use of whatever arrangement the Vietnamese determine is conducive to coordinating activities and, in most cases, the closer SOF operate to indigenous personnel the better.

Ultimately in terms of the US engaging Vietnam in security cooperation both countries are building from scratch. While Vietnam’s preference for non-alignment and non-aggression limits the ability to advance security cooperation according to *Competition Continuum* there are still opportunities to work with Vietnam in ways that allow it to contend with more effectively and balance against Chinese aggression and coercion. The mere fact that Vietnam is increasingly determined to improve its military capabilities bodes well for US and Vietnamese engagement in the future if a cooperative relationship can be more firmly established. Using SOF to work with the Vietnamese military in humanitarian assistance, recognizing and countering foreign influence operations, and improving training and coordination in anticipation of territorial altercations maintains Vietnam’s commitment to non-alignment and non-aggression. The US aim in the current moment is less to turn Vietnam into a potential base of operations and more helping Vietnam establish itself as a power confident in its capability to deter Chinese

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<sup>136</sup> Derek Grossman and Dung Hyunh, “Vietnam’s Defense Policy of ‘No’ Quietly Saves Room for ‘Yes.’”

aggression and therefore serve as an effective buffer to future Chinese expansion in the Asia Pacific.

## The Philippines

### Recent Context:

Like Vietnam the bulk of conflicts between China and the Philippines are related to maritime and territorial disputes. There exists some uncertainty however about which direction the Philippines will take as President Duterte has sought closer relations with China during his term.<sup>137</sup> This contrasts with the upper echelons of the Filipino military who see China's increased assertiveness particularly over the last few decades as a serious encroachment that requires increased pushback.<sup>138</sup> Increasingly the Filipino military is sending more ships to press the rights of its fishermen which like Vietnam saw a fishing boat rammed and sank by a CCG vessel necessitating a rescue of the crew.<sup>139</sup> According to the *Asia Times* many in the Filipino military are lobbying Duterte to fully reinstate the US-Philippines VFA as a means of securing defense cooperation between both countries.<sup>140</sup> Michael J. Green and Gregory B. Poling in a hypothetical memorandum to President Biden laid out why a suspension of the VFA would make continued inaction of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) a practical impossibility.<sup>141</sup> Green and Poling argue that loss of defensive cooperation with the Philippines would leave US defense planners scrambling to meet response requirements in the South China

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<sup>137</sup> Derek Grossman, "The Philippines is Sticking Right by America's Side," *The Diplomat*, December 2, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/the-philippines-is-sticking-right-by-americas-side/>.

<sup>138</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, "Vietnam, Philippines Fortify South China Sea Bases," *Asia Times*, February 24, 2021. <https://asiatimes.com/2021/02/vietnam-philippines-fortify-south-china-sea-bases/>.

<sup>139</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, "Vietnam, Philippines Fortify South China Sea Bases."

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., "Vietnam, Philippines Fortify South China Sea Bases."

<sup>141</sup> Michael J. Green and Gregor B. Poling, "The U.S. Alliance with the Philippines," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, December 3, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-alliance-philippines>.

Sea should the AFP find themselves under attack.<sup>142</sup> Similarly Hal Brands argues that a good strategic relationship with the Philippines is essential for securing the southern flank of critical US partners like South Korea and Japan.<sup>143</sup> While Duterte has embraced Beijing's offers of economic development assistance, including allowing Huawei to build out its 5G network, China's influence over the Philippines is increasingly compromised by its aggressive coast guard actions in the South Pacific.<sup>144</sup>

### **The Second Thomas Shoal Standoff:**

In 1999 the Philippines navy deliberately ran aground a WWII era cargo ship the BRP *Sierra Madre* to secure their claim to the Second Thomas Shoal inside the Philippines EEZ but whose claim is disputed by China.<sup>145</sup> Since that time a contingent of Filipino marines has garrisoned the *Sierra Madre* requiring that the Philippines maintain a capability to resupply the outpost as well as repair and refurbish the ship to continue to make it habitable for the garrison.<sup>146</sup> This resulted at various times in a standoff between the China Coast Guard and Filipino civilian resupply vessels, some of which were intimidated into turning around by the CCG. In 2014 following a period of tense exchanges as the Philippines sought to refurbish the *Sierra Madre* the US lent support to the Philippines position recognizing the *Sierra Madre* as an "outpost" and decrying Beijing's attempts to interfere with its resupply.<sup>147</sup> Following Beijing's

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<sup>142</sup> Green and Poling, "The U.S. Alliance with the Philippines."

<sup>143</sup> Hal Brands, "The Philippines is a Flashpoint in the U.S.-China Cold War," *Bloomberg*, February 23, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-02-24/the-philippines-is-a-flashpoint-in-the-u-s-china-cold-war>.

<sup>144</sup> Brands, "The Philippines is a Flashpoint in the U.S.-China Cold War."

<sup>145</sup> Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas, "Counter-Coercion Series: Second Thomas Shoal Incident," *The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative and The Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 9, 2017. <https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-2nd-thomas-shoal/>.

<sup>146</sup> Green et al., "Counter-Coercion Series: Second Thomas Shoal Incident."

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., "Counter-Coercion Series: Second Thomas Shoal Incident."

protestations a sea based resupply mission was launched with members of the international press aboard the vessel, a CCG cutter made some attempt to dissuade the mission but the Filipino vessel managed to maneuver to the outpost, offload its cargo as well as replacements for the garrison and depart the following day.<sup>148</sup> While the situation on the Second Thomas Shoal is an example of Filipino resistance to Chinese coercion it remains a point of contention between the two countries. Like China's seizure of the Scarborough Shoal in 2012, the Second Thomas Shoal demonstrates the challenges faced by countries regionally in challenging China's claims to disputed territory.

## Discussion

The Philippines *National Security Policy* for 2017-2022 lays out eight goals and strategic objectives for ensuring national harmony and safeguarding their sovereignty and territory. While most of their policy goals relate to matters of domestic security and stability, two relate to the Philippines conduct internationally, safeguard the territorial integrity and sovereignty, and contribute to international peace.<sup>149</sup> Each objective outlines four points to be addressed, the following tables look at points of intersection between the *Competition Continuum* and its assertions about cooperation and each strategic objective:

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., "Counter-Coercion Series: Second Thomas Shoal Incident."

<sup>149</sup> Republic of the Philippines, *National Security Policy for Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People*, 21,23.



<b>Cooperation Criteria</b>	<b>Safeguard Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty</b>			
	Protect Territory and Sovereignty, Enhance Maritime Security Cooperation, Pursue Defense Modernization	SCS/WPS Settlement Management	Pursue Regional Cooperation Around the DOC	Pursue International Consensus on Boundaries and Obligations
Engage Selectively	SFA, MISO, CA	SFA	SFA, CA	SFA
Maintain	SFA, MISO, CA	SFA	SFA, CA	SFA
Advance	SFA, CA	SFA		

**Table 2.** Establishing Filipino Sovereignty.

Cooperation Criteria	Contribute to International Peace			
	Promote Dialogue and Enhance International Relations, Including New Security Arrangements	Expand Engagement with International Organizations	Expand the Reach and Capacity of the Philippines Foreign Service	Expand Security, Defense, and Diplomacy to Meet NSP
Engage Selectively	SFA		CA	SFA, CA
Maintain	SFA		CA	SFA, CA
Advance	SFA		CA	SFA, CA

**Table 3.** Buttressing international relationships.

### **A History of Cooperation:**

It is important to restate there is a long history of security cooperation between the Philippines and the MDT with the ongoing discussions around the VFA. There was also the recent and extended period of advice and assist operations from SOF to the AFP as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.<sup>150</sup> This extensive history of cooperation between the US and the Philippines stands in contrast to Vietnam where engagement is increasing but there is an aversion to more formal security cooperation. The Philippines has a wider array of security concerns historically which the SOF engagement was aimed at addressing over the roughly 14 years of Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines.<sup>151</sup> Most prominently these missions included counterterrorism and capacity building operations for the AFP,<sup>152</sup> but many of the lessons imparted are not wholly distinct from those that can be applied or reoriented in countering

<sup>150</sup> Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy,” 151.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 153.

Chinese aggression within their national territory or around its periphery. US special operations forces did not engage in direct action against insurgents and terrorists like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), but they did aid the AFP and the Philippine National Police (PNP) in improving capabilities, conducting CA, and improving their information operations with the civilian population.<sup>153</sup>

### **The China Challenge:**

Fundamentally many of the challenges facing the Philippines require the buttressing of international institutional arrangements and reinforcing opportunities for dialogue with China and other regional partners in limiting the potential for altercations. Looking at Table 2 and the Philippines strategic objectives however there are opportunities for SOF to help, engage, maintain, and advance support for the Philippines in countering Chinese aggression in the SCS and West Philippine Sea (WPS). Considering the previous engagement during Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines SOF could certainly assist the AFP with improving training and pursuing defense modernization in the face of changing Chinese tactics in the SCS. China’s asymmetric approach in employing its maritime militia and CCG vessels suggest that an unconventional warfare (UW) strategy could be adapted to reestablish deterrence in the SCS/WPS. The aim would be not to engage Chinese vessels in open hostilities but to employ new tactics to better assert Filipino claims over territory firmly within their EEZ. As it is laid out in their strategy the Philippines is committed to enhancing its bilateral and multilateral arrangements particularly as it relates to more effectively codifying and enforcing the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) and Code of Conduct (COC) governing interactions in the

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 154-155.

SCS.<sup>154</sup> Most of these approaches will not involve SOF or the US more broadly in improving regional security but SOF can assist the Philippines in much the same way they can assist Vietnam. Looking at the last column of Table 3 SOF can help contribute across the cooperation continuum to the Philippines initiative to better “Expand security, defense, social and economic diplomacy in support of the national vision and the country’s security and development agenda,” in any number of ways.<sup>155</sup> SOF can provide enhanced SFA to the Philippines as they increasingly seeking to improve their flexibility in improving their security umbrella over the roughly 7,600 islands that make up their archipelago.<sup>156</sup>

The Philippine Marine Corps (PMC) is pursuing a new doctrine termed the Archipelagic Coastal Defense (ACD) which increasingly emphasized interoperability with other elements of the AFP.<sup>157</sup> Like Vietnam the AFP and specifically the PMC are seeking to improve joint operations and enhance their capabilities in response to China’s disaggregated approach and increase their capabilities more broadly to safeguard maritime law and improve internal security.<sup>158</sup> Given the density of littoral and riverine regions to patrol US SOF can assist the PMC in the training and employment of small boats operations to more rapidly disperse their forces or respond to an aggressor whether that is China or another threat actor. US Special Operations Command Pacific (SOCPAC) conducted joint exercises with several Asian and South American nations including the Philippines in June and July of 2020 in Hawaii where SOCPAC

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<sup>154</sup> Republic of the Philippines, *National Security Policy for Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People*, 21.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>156</sup> Rej Cortez Torrecampo, “Philippine Marine’s New Operating Concept Highlights Their Growing National Security Role,” *The Diplomat*, May 6, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/philippine-marines-new-operating-concept-highlights-their-growing-national-security-role/>.

<sup>157</sup> Rej Cortez Torrecampo, “Philippine Marine’s New Operating Concept Highlights Their Growing National Security Role.”

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, “Philippine Marine’s New Operating Concept Highlights Their Growing National Security Role.”

elements rehearsed deploying small boats from submarines.<sup>159</sup> These types of roles can also serve an important CA function enhancing the capabilities of the AFP to conduct theater search and rescue capabilities when dealing with China in the SCS or responding to an urgent humanitarian crisis akin to how the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group responded to a typhoon on the Island of Luzon in 1972.<sup>160</sup> At a minimum SOCOM's core functions of SFA, FID and UW can support the PMC's mission to better organize their newly established Coastal Defense Regiment (CDR) in its role to of safeguarding Filipino national territory and its naval forces from foreign aggressors.<sup>161</sup>

One specific opportunity is related to the *Sierra Madre*, the occasional need to rotate the garrison there provides the US an opportunity to further support the Filipino claim over the Second Thomas Shoal. The US can extend an offer for elements from United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) to establish a temporary presence alongside AFP personnel to support the Filipino claim over the Second Thomas Shoal. As stated, the US lent support to Filipino claim in 2014 and brought international media attention to disputes with China in the WPS.<sup>162</sup> By further extending a US commitment to place personnel within the *Sierra Madre* it could help signal resolve on the part of the Philippines and US to show both states are committed to WPS settlement management as described in Table 2 and advancing defense diplomacy in Table 3 in line with the broader aims of the Philippines *National Security Policy*. This kind of cooperation helps address China's broader approach in the SCS. China characterizes the actions of its neighbors when they assert their rights as "provocative" and any kind of US presence as

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<sup>159</sup> Andrew White, "Maritime Fobs for Seaborne SOF," *Asian Military Review*, September 22, 2020, <https://asianmilitaryreview.com/2020/09/maritime-fobs-for-seaborne-sof/>.

<sup>160</sup> Piasecki, "Special Action Force Asia," 5.

<sup>161</sup> Rej Cortez Torrecampo, "Philippine Marine's New Operating Concept Highlights Their Growing National Security Role."

<sup>162</sup> Green et al., "Counter-Coercion Series: Second Thomas Shoal Incident."

“meddling” in their regional affairs.<sup>163</sup> What the Philippines NSP makes clear however is there are abiding concerns around solidifying codes of conduct to reduce overall tension in the region as well as secure their economic and diplomatic rights to transit the SCS/WPS without provoking a confrontation. While the ongoing discussions on the VFA are being considered by President Duterte the US can use the lessons of past security cooperation to argue for a phased reintroduction of SOF as an opening to demonstrate the viability of advancing cooperation and coordination. Relying on SOF in the early stages of a cooperation campaign would also not signal a dramatic influx of resources in a way that would undermine the Philippines broader economic ties to Beijing.

### **Implications:**

As China grows in influence globally there is no doubt it will generate an outsized reaction in how it deals with the neighbors closest to its national territory. Increasingly China is characterizing US involvement in the Asia Pacific as fostering instability and provoking confrontation but recurrent clashes with the Vietnam and the Philippines suggest a broader resistance to China’s security and development agenda is asserting itself. Neither Vietnam or the Philippines are eager to antagonize China by hosting a significant US military presence but that does not preclude the potential for targeted engagement in areas and under circumstances that both states could argue are in keeping with enhancing their overall capabilities. Using SOF as a gateway to cooperation even with a state like Vietnam where ideological and economic

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<sup>163</sup> The State Council Information Office of the Peoples Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy (2015)*, 5.

differences seemingly constitute a barrier to engagement would likely improve their confidence in resisting Beijing in the future and lay the groundwork for more direct military engagement.

As other authors have suggested the ongoing pivot to GPC illustrates new challenges both for the broader conventional force but perhaps more acutely for SOF as the last several decades have been spent meeting an irregular threat with a fusion of unconventional warfare, security force assistance, and direct action, areas where SOF can operate somewhat independently to lead and excel. Hal Brands and Tom Nichols argued that SOF will necessarily have to accept a diminished role as the US seeks to impose a more comprehensive deterrence framework with respect to revisionist actors.<sup>164</sup> Brands and Nichols however recognize that SOF's most effective role is in working nominal allies and potential partners in building their capabilities and supporting their efforts to resist coercion.<sup>165</sup> With this in mind using SOF within the *Competition Continuum* to shore up partner relationships and enhance their potential for independent action represents an ideal interim approach to containing China. Beijing's reticence to take aggressive action that might negatively impact its development agenda argues that more assertive deterrence actions by its neighbors would inhibit potential escalation.<sup>166</sup> SOF assistance in capacity building demonstrates a level of resolve and willingness to engage with partners on their terms and in ways that contribute to partner resilience. Both Vietnam and the Philippines have reasonable concerns about how the appearance of alignment with the US will draw Beijing's ire but using SOF should be articulated as part of a larger effort to support their

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<sup>164</sup> Brands and Nichols, "Special Operations Forces and Great-Power Competition," 3-4.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>166</sup> Timothy R. Heath, "An Overview of China's National Military Strategy," in McReynolds (ed.) *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, 22-23.

broader security agendas not simply aimed at balancing against or deterring China. As the *Competition Continuum* notes:

Campaigning through cooperation requires patience, consistency, and empathy. The most productive relationships take time to build. A partnership is unlikely to reach its potential if the joint force approaches military engagement as discrete events rather than as part of a deliberate, continuous process.<sup>167</sup>

Using SOF and its varied array of mission specialization to support partners against challenges rather than exercising a declarative US policy that forces countries to take sides by hosting significant US assets or join in codified security agreements which misses the mark when it comes to competing with China below the threshold of armed conflict. Yes, the US must continue to support freedom and prepare to counter China's increasing Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2AD) capabilities but each state in the Asia Pacific is uniquely capable against as well uniquely susceptible to China's active defense approach. Recognizing that requires a process that is locally engaged, demonstrates results, and when welcomed has established support from the broader US defense and policy community. It is a circumstance which SOF is uniquely qualified to meet.

## **Conclusion**

In many respects Vietnam and the Philippines represent good cases for how the US should approach states that find themselves torn between the exigencies of trade and development and the ongoing challenges competing interstate relations pose to sovereignty.

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<sup>167</sup> JCS, *Competition Continuum*, 7.



Both countries are struggling with how forcefully to resist Chinese aggression with their respective EEZs but outright alignment with the US leaves them exposed to Chinese economic sanction and likely other forms of aggression. By relying on US Special Operations working within the *Competition Continuum* to illustrate the benefits of limited and transactional security cooperation to middle powers the US can work towards a mutually beneficial and adaptable framework for potentially more intensive future cooperation. Neither Vietnam or the Philippines desires or reasonably could sever important economic and developmental ties to China. By shoring up however even limited joint security cooperation the US could assist them in constraining Beijing's most aggressive impulses and help inhibit their broader strategic ambitions. What is needed is a more concrete understanding of how Beijing will react to more comprehensive joint action between the US and its neighbors on the periphery. There is every reason to expect Beijing will negatively react aggressively to potential US strategic encirclement and both Vietnam and the Philippines are reticent to accept any overt US attempts to aggressively balance against China. In this way a consistent SOF presence in these countries helps the value of security cooperation both locally and internationally without the alarmism a larger military presence may trigger within their own foreign policy establishments or more importantly Beijing's. As a practical matter more concerted diplomatic engagement with Hanoi would be of great benefit in gauging their willingness to accept broader US security assistance. Increasing the flow of advanced weapon systems with additional offers of training and support could help promote goodwill in the near term and advance discussions on potential strategies to counter Chinese coercion. In the case of the Philippines much will depend on President Duterte's continued extension of the VFA but even that is not definitive as his term comes closer to an end. The Filipino defense establishment seems to favor ongoing security cooperation with

the US, so continued engagement with and support for their claims over the WPS is vital to demonstrating US commitment to regional stability and support for a code of conduct within their respective economic spheres.<sup>168</sup> Ultimately the US must demonstrate a willingness to be flexible in adapting to each states proscribed needs in the way the US can differentiate itself from Beijing's desire for total primacy over the Asia Pacific.

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<sup>168</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, "Vietnam, Philippines Fortify South China Sea Bases."

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## **Curriculum Vitae**

Matthew Fernandez was born May 27, 1985 in Redwood City, California. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of San Francisco in Politics in 2007. He worked at Coca-Cola for ten years before beginning his pursuit of a Master of Arts degree in Global Security Studies with a concentration in Strategic Studies and a Certificate in Intelligence Studies from Johns Hopkins University.